Senator Morse:

THE "VIETNAM LOBBY"

(By Robert Scheer and Warren Hinckle)

Among the stacks of wood-based engravings filed in dustry pyramids in the New Leader's editorial offices is a generously-sized full-faced reproduction of the late Ngo Dinh Diem.

The typed label on the back that used to identify Diem as "Vietnam's Democratic Alternative" has been torn off. The steel plate is worn from rubbing, face down, against the shellacked surface of the public school surplus-type furniture in the magazine's quarters in the old social democratic Rand School Building on New York's still-cobblestoned 15th Street.

The New Leader's cut file is a strange place to begin the story of the "Vietnam Lobby," but then it is a strange story. It is the history of a small and enthusiastic group of people—including a cardinal, an ex-Austrian Socialist leader, and a CIA agent—who maneuvered the Eisenhower administration and the American press into supporting the ruthless, unpopular and hopeless regime of a despot and believed it actually was all an exercise in democracy. That this group was able to accomplish this against the better thoughts of Eisenhower and over the traditional wariness of the press is testimony to its power and its persuasiveness. Another chapter of the history of the "Vietnam Lobby" is how its thesis came to be accepted by a broad consensus of liberals and intellectuals in America—a consensus that only recently has begun to splinter and is still largely intact.

The thesis is based on an overriding belief in the beauty of the American way of life—and in the nefarious nature of communism. It is the belief that the only reason a nation might vote communistic is because it hasn't been properly exposed to the democratic way of life: If a people know democracy, they will vote democratic. And if it becomes necessary on occasion to tolerate undemocratic means to achieve the ultimate democratic goal—well, is it all for the people's own good.

For the New Leader, a liberal, militantly anti-Communist biweekly with a strong belief in social reform, this theory was naturally applicable to the case of Diem, a firm anti-Communist. The New Leader in 1959 hailed Diem's "Democratic One Man Rule." To the school of liberalism where anticommunism is the sine qua non, the idea of a "Democratic one man rule" is not an anomoly.

The story of the "Vietnam Lobby" is a case study in American politics from the mid-1950's to the early 1960's, and the role of the New Leader in that period is worth singling out for special attention because the magazine played a smaller but similar role in spreading the thesis of the Nation's most famous pressure group—the China lobby. The disillusioned idealists and exradicals that C. Wright Mills once dubbed "The NATO intellectuals" were prominent in both lobbies. Like the New Leader, they were willing to believe the best about anything or anybody anti-Communist.

The history of the "Vietnam Lobby" dates from a meeting in a Tokyo tea room in 1950. There Wesley Fishel, a young Michigan State University political scientist, had a serious conversation with Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was in the 17th year of a self-imposed exile. A sort of Catholic mandarin, he was by family background, personal inclination, and training a member of Vietnam's feudal aristocracy. The mandarin sense of survival called for cooperation with the French, and Diem had risen to the rank of Governor of Phat Diem Province in the French colonial civil service. A militant anti-Communist, in 1933 he helped the French fight the Communists who were then leading the Vietnamese anticolonial revolt. But Diem decided that France and Vietnam were incompatible, and went into exile. It is illustrative of his character that he chose voluntary exile rather than remain in his country and fight with the "masses" (which included the Communists) against the French. Diem was a firm believer in the ways of God dictating the acts of men. He would wait for some Hegelian force to sweep him back onto the center-stage of his country's history. Providence, in 1950, took the form of Wesley Fishel.

The young professor was impressed by Diem's long wait to rule his country and his views on independent nationalism, anti-communism, and social reform. Fishel urged Diem to come to the United States to seek this Government's support. When Diem agreed, Fishel arranged for Michigan State to sponsor the trip. On the Michigan State campus, Diem found kinship and support among both faculty and administration—a relationship which later developed into the university's extensive aid project to Diem's government, where a team of some 20 professors did everything from drafting his budgets to training his secret police. Outside the academic world, Diem found support in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Diem's brother, Bishop Can, arranged for the Vietnamese exile to stay in Maryknoll seminaries in New Jersey and New York. This was Cardinal Spellman's territory, and the Cardinal and the Vietnamese Mandarin soon developed a close relationship. And no wonder. Diem was an anti-Communist and he was a Catholic. His brother was even a Bishop. One could not approach the Cardinal with better credentials.

In addition to the academicians and the clerics, Diem found to his supprise that he had a strong appeal with American liberals and intellectuals. When Diem was in the United States, from 1950 to 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy was on the loose and liberals felt it mandatory to show their anti-communism. The liberal-intellectual world was still quaking from the shocks of the loss of China, the Korean war, and the conviction of Alger Hiss. To suggest dealing with Communists—any Communists—on [illegible] was [illegible]

Yet Communist forces in Asia had monopolized the undeniably popular twin battle cries: nationalism and social reform. The liberals searched for a "third way." They thought they found it in the anti-Communist Diem as the leader of a "free" Vietnam. To think that the Vietnamese people would suddenly give to an absentee aristocrat the credit and gratitude for the fruits of the 20-year anti-colonial war the Communists had been leading against the French was, to say the least, naively optimistic. It also ignored Vietnamese history. It proved disastrous. The same tragic results were to occur a decade later when, again ignoring recent history, the Kennedy-Johnson administrations followed the same fruitless military path of the French before them.

One of the first liberals to openly champion Diem was inveterate traveler, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. Justice Douglas had just returned, discouraged, from a visit to Vietnam. An influx of American military aid hadn't helped the French in their losing war against Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh forces. The Vietminh clearly had the support of the people; but the Vietminh were Communist-led, and thus clearly unacceptable as leaders of Vietnam. Then Douglas met Diem in Washington, and became enthusiastic. The Justice arranged a breakfast with Senators MIKE MANSFIELD and John F. Kennedy and introduced them to Diem. Both men were taken with him. And during the next few years, before Dien Bien Phu, both MANSFIELD and Kennedy were extremely critical of the French presence in Vietnam and of the Eisenhower administration's support of them. They called for an "independent nationalist alternative," a phrase which later was to become a cliché. Kennedy, in a major speech immediately before the Geneva Conference in April of 1954, warned against any negotiated solution that would allow participation in the Vietnamese Government by Ho Chi Minh. The Communists, he said, would then eventually take over because they were so popular. Instead, he called for an independent—i.e., a Democratic and anti-Communist—Vietnam, supported by the United States. This Vietnam Diem was to lead.

The Geneva Conference, of course, called for no such thing. It affirmed the independence of the colonial government of Vietnam and called for an end to hostilities. A sort of interim trustee arrangement was agreed upon whereby the French would preside in the south and the Vietminh in the north for 2 years, ending in national elections in 1956 when the Vietnamese people would choose their own government. Those elections were never held because the "Vietnam Lobby" did not want them. Clearly, Ho Chi Minh would have won a popular vote—and that would have been the end of the "independent nationalistic alternative."

Thus men as diverse in their backgrounds as Spellman, Douglas, and Kennedy—not to mention John Foster Dulles—came to support an aggressive policy against a popular adversary in the name of freedom and to believe in it.

The telephone operator in the chancery was used to such things, but even she blinked a little when Cardinal Spellman picked up the telephone and said: "Get me Joe Kennedy." When these two powerful men got on the line together, one winter afternoon in 1955, they settled quickly, as men of decision do, the steps that had to be taken to swing the wavering Eisenhower administration solidly behind the young regime of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem. The report of this extraordinary conversation comes from Joseph Buttinger, an official of the International Rescue Committee, who was sitting in Spellman's office. Buttinger had just returned from Saigon, and he brought bad news. Diem's administration was in trouble. Buttinger thought Diem was the only hope of Vietnam, but needed to

Continued

consolidate his power. There was opposition from the Vietnamese, from the French and from some key Americans. Diem could not survive without increased U.S. support, yet the present U.S. commitment appeared in danger of waning. Eisenhower's special Ambassador to Vietnam, Gen. Lawton Collins, was openly skeptical of Diem's ability to establish a viable regime. The journalist Joseph Alsop felt Diem's base of support was too narrow to effectively rival the popular Viet Minh. Eisenhower himself was not particularly sympathetic to Diem. The General recognized Ho Chi Minh's popularity, and was opposed to the effort to install an alternative as both undemocratic and of dubious success, as he later remarked in his book "Mandate for Change."

But the Eisenhower administration, not noted for its rigidity of purpose, was vulnerable to the political pressures marshalled by Cardinal Spellman and the elder Kennedy. Kennedy arranged for Buttinger to meet with Senator MANSFIELD and some key State Department personnel in Washington. His son, Senator John F. Kennedy, was in California, but Buttinger had a long conversation with the Senator's assistant, Ted Sorenson. Spellman took care of the press. He set up meetings for Buttinger with editors of the New York Times, the editorial board of the Herald Tribune, and key editors of both Time and Life. Two days later the Times printed an editorial containing the Buttinger thesis. Buttinger himself took pen in hand and wrote an article for the Reporter praising Diem as democracy's alternative in southeast Asia.

To fully appreciate Buttinger's role in the "Vietnam lobby" it is necessary to go back to Diem's ascendance to the premiership in July 1954. The new Premier from his first day in office began to crush all opposition and concentrate power within a small, nepotistic group. Diem's targets included the private armies of the religious sects, anti-Communist Vietnamese leaders who made the mistake of also being anti-Diem, and the identifiable Vietminh partisans remaining in South Vietnam. This did not make for popular acclaim but Diem wasn't looking for popularity. He knew that his base of support was minuscule, that he would have trouble with the majority of the population who has been supporting the Vietminh in the long war against the French. So force was the only way he could effectively ready his people for the "democratic alternative." His authoritarian tactics were not widely reported in the American press until 8 years later, when he fell from favor.

Diem's strongman rule in South Vietnam gave the United States two policy choices. It could keep the Vietminh from power, block the scheduled 1956 national elections, prevent unification of the country, hang on and trust for the best. Or it could follow the new French policy of flexibility in a hopeless situation, allow the elections, learn to live with an unquestionably greater Communist influence in Vietnam, and accept the necessary parallel of a lessening of Western power there.

There were arguments for both positions within the Eisenhower administration. Helpful in pushing the United States into a "hard line" of support for the authoritarian Diem was an unusual array of visitors to Saigon in the early days of the new Premier's rule.

Cardinal Spellman, who told an American Legion Convention that the Geneva agreements meant "taps" for freedom in southeast Asia, flew to Vietnam to hand-deliver the first check of Catholic Relief Agency aid. Wesley Fishel, the Michigan State University professor, took up residence in the Presidential Palace and became one of Diem's chief advisers. Also bedding down in the palace was Wolf Ladejinsky, a New Deal who had stayed on in the Agriculture Department only to be plowed under in the McCarthy period. Diem hired Ladejinsky to study land reform, which convinced many American liberals that Diem was serious about social reforms. (These reforms proved later to be not only inefficient but laughable. Diem tried to restore the colonial property balance by returning to absentee landlords land that the bewildered peasants thought they owned—land the Communists had given them during the revolutionary period.)

Another important visitor to Diem was Leo Cherne, the President of the International Rescue Committee. Founded to help refugees from Germany in the Hitler period, the committee turned during the cold war to aiding refugees from Communist countries. Cherne spent two and a half weeks in Vietnam and came away convinced that Diem had great potential as an anti-Communist leader. He then sent his assistant, Joseph Buttinger, to set up a Vietnam operation for the Committee. There Buttinger met Col. (now Gen.) Edward Lansdale, the CIA's man in Saigon, hero of Eugene Burdick's "The Ugly American" and villain of Grahame Greene's "The Quiet American." Lansdale, a gregarious former San Francisco advertising man who believes in "selling" the American way abroad, is given sole credit in the recent book on the CIA, "The Invisible Government," for the U.S. support of Diem. That is not quite fair. It ignores the hard work of Cardinal Spellman and Buttinger. It was the unlikely triumvirate of the CIA man, the cardinal and Buttinger, an ex-Austrian Socialist leader, that was responsible for forming U.S. policy behind Diem.

Landsdale went through channels. He convinced CIA Director Allen Dulles of Diem's worth. Dulles talked to his brother, the Secretary of State. And John Foster Dulles brought the word to Eisenhower.

Spellman's influence was important in certifying Diem as a solid anti-Communist, no small thing in the McCarthy era.

Buttinger made the contacts in the ex-radical and the liberal circles which were to eventually support the consensus of the "Vietnam lobby" for the next 6 years.

Buttinger's background is important in understanding the eagerness with which he accepted Diem as the "alternative." A disillusioned Socialist, Buttinger saw in the stocky, 5-foot-5 Premier the nationalist answer to communism that he had himself attempted to provide as an Austrian Socialist leader in the 1930's. Buttinger was then one Gustav Richter, the provincial youth leader of the Social-Democratic Party which had been forced underground by the waves of victorious fascism. Buttinger fought back, but it was an embittering experience. His one accomplishment, he relates in his memoirs, "In The Twilight of Socialism," was to halt the spread of the Communists. But just when Buttinger had reorganized his party, the Nazis goosestepped in. He fled to Paris and then to New York, and in flight the certainty of his world of Socialist politics vanished, and so did his ideology. Buttinger did not join the Socialist Party in America, though in a continuing search for new ideas to replace his fallen Marxist certainty he dabbled in Socialist politics as an editor of Dissent magazine.

He took to Diem with the enthusiasm that can only be mustered by an ex-radical who, once again, has something to believe in. He had been in Vietnam only 4 days when, at Landsdale's request, he met Diem. He was to meet with him frequently during the ensuing 3 months. Landsdale took Buttinger under his wing and introduced him to the top security people in Diem's government and the Vietnamese Army. This convinced Buttinger that Diem had the strength to remain in power if only the United States would give him complete support.

Before Buttinger left for the United States in December 1954, he had several 6-hour conversations with Diem. He returned a man with a mission: to settle for nothing less than a total commitment to Diem by the United States.

With the aid of Lansdale and Cardinal Spellman, he succeeded, and the "Vietnam lobby" was born.

The "Vietnam lobby" was an unusual alliance of ex-left intellectuals, conservative generals, and liberal politicians. Its primary goal was to convince the public that "free Vietnam" was accomplishing miracles and could withstand the Red onslaught if the United States would continue its support. One year after Buttinger's return from Vietnam, in the fall of 1955, the "lobby" achieved a measure of formal organization with the establishment of the American Friends of Vietnam. The Friends, for the next 6 years, were in the forefront of the fight to maintain Diem's regime as a showcase of democracy.

Like all such organizations, the American Friends of Vietnam had a letterhead with a string of impressive names running in small print down the side. But the Friends' list was unusual because it was virtually a roll call of the liberal center: Senators John F. Kennedy and Richard Neuberger, intellectuals Max Lerner and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Representatives EMANUEL CELLER and EDNA KELLY, diplomat Angier Biddle Duke. For balance, there was Socialist Norman Thomas (who has since changed his position radically) and ultra-conservative J. Bracken Lee. Two famous generals, "Wild Bill" Donovan and "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, were co-chairmen.

The Friends was run by its 14-member executive committee. An analysis of the committee reveals a curious relationship between the Friends, the International Rescue Committee, and a New York fund raiser and public relations man named Harold Oram. The relationship is extraordinary because the executive committee of the International Rescue Committee, the executive committee of the American Friends of Vietnam, and Harold Oram's executive personnel were all pretty much the same people.

It was Oram, then public relations man for the International Rescue Committee and a former promoter of 1930's leftist causes, who later became associated with anti-Communist and liberal center groups, whom Buttinger first approached for help when he returned from Vietnam in late 1954. Oram arranged through a friend at the Catholic Relief Agency in Washington for Buttinger to meet with Cardinal Spellman.

Two months before the organization of the American Friends of Vietnam was announced, Oram's public relations firm signed a contract to represent the Vietnamese Government for $3,000 a month plus expenses. They stayed on the job until 1961, Oram was a member of the executive committee of the American Friends of Vietnam. So was Elliot Newcomb, his partner at the time the contract was signed with the Diem regime. Newcomb left the firm a year later, but remained on the executive committee and was subsequently treasurer. The executive secretary, and later corporation secretary and assistant treasurer of the American Friends of Vietnam, was a young man named Gilbert Jonas—Oram's account executive and "campaign director" on the Vietnam account. Oram and Jonas were registered as foreign agents acting for the Republic of Vietnam during the same period they held key executive positions on the Friends, a seemingly independent committee dedicated to the blameless purpose of working "to extend more broadly a mutual understanding of Vietnamese and American history, cultural customs, and democratic institutions."

The interlocking directorates of the International Rescue Committee and the Friends was more to be expected than the strange connection between the Republic of